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By saving farms and ranches, American Farmland Trust

"This plantation is a veritable smorgasbord for wildlife," says Ed Temple. "It has a little bit of everything." Temple, a biologist with Ducks Unlimited, a group that preserves waterfowl habitat, is talking about the 1,800-acre Upper Brandon Farm, a centuries-old property on the James River some 15 miles north of Jamestown, Virginia.

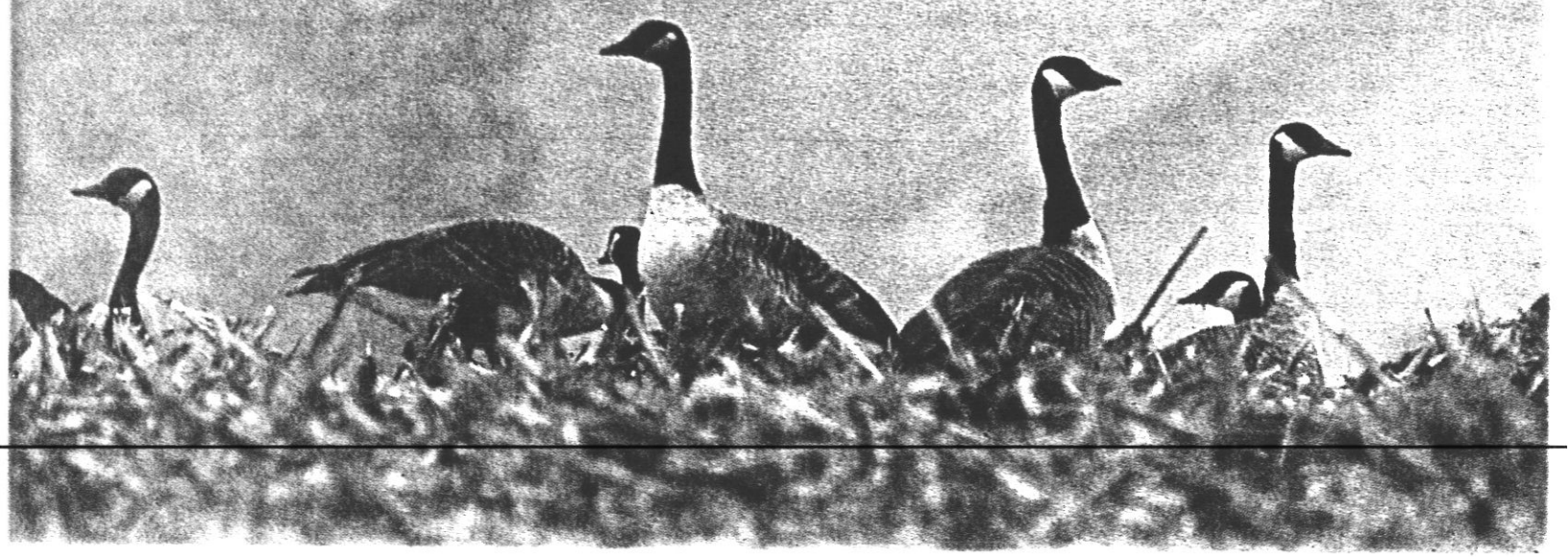
Temple's use of the word "smorgasbord" conjures up images of an all-you-can-eat buffet, and, in fact, the plantation provides critical feeding and wintering grounds for migratory birds. A 1997 survey of the farm's marshes, freshwater ponds and buffer strips along the James counted nearly 4,500 geese, swans and ducks, including widgeons, gadwalls, mallards and pintails.

"This property is very special from a waterfowl point of view," Temple adds. "It is rare to find a parcel that has both tidal and freshwater marshes." Its value to waterfowl also is due to the fact it's a stopover on the Atlantic flyway, the major eastern migratory route stretching from Canada to South America.

The plantation has historical significance, too: It's one of the nation's oldest colonial agricultural sites. In 1616, King James I of England and the Company of Virginia gave a land grant to John Martin, who began growing fruit, vegetables and tobacco on the property. In the mid-1980s, James River Corporation, a Richmond-based manufacturer of food and consumer products, bought a portion of the original homestead—the Upper Brandon Farm—and restored it. Currently the farm, which was purchased by a group of private investors last March, produces corn, wheat and soybeans.

There is yet another reason why the farm is unique: Its farmland and wildlife are protected forever. In 1994, the James River Corporation donated a conservation easement on the property to American Farmland Trust and The Nature Conservancy to preserve the farm's agricultural production, its natural resources, and the wildlife it attracts.

Upper Brandon Farm is just one of several AFT-protected properties that provide valuable habitat for wildlife. For example, AFT has helped arrange similar voluntary agreements for the Fetcher Ranch in Colorado and the UX Ranch in Nevada, which, like the one at Upper Brandon Farm, protect agricultural production and wildlife at the same time.



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protects wildlife habitat, too.

By Ruth Goldstein

"Well-managed farms and ranches can provide high quality wildlife habitat while still meeting farmers' and ranchers' economic goals," says AFT President Ralph Grossi. "And at AFT we understand that protecting wildlife and scenic open space are among the many reasons local communities are motivated to save agricultural land. Appreciating the multiple benefits of farmland is important to building the constituency necessary to protect it for future generations."

"The most special thing about the farm is the way that she changes her face in the course of the year," says Bobby Swineford, the longtime manager of Upper Brandon Farm. "In the spring, everything comes out blooming and budding. Bluebirds come back. The world awakens. In the fall, everything is turning and the waterfowl return. There's a cacophony of sound all the time. And when the moon is out, the ducks and geese fly all night."

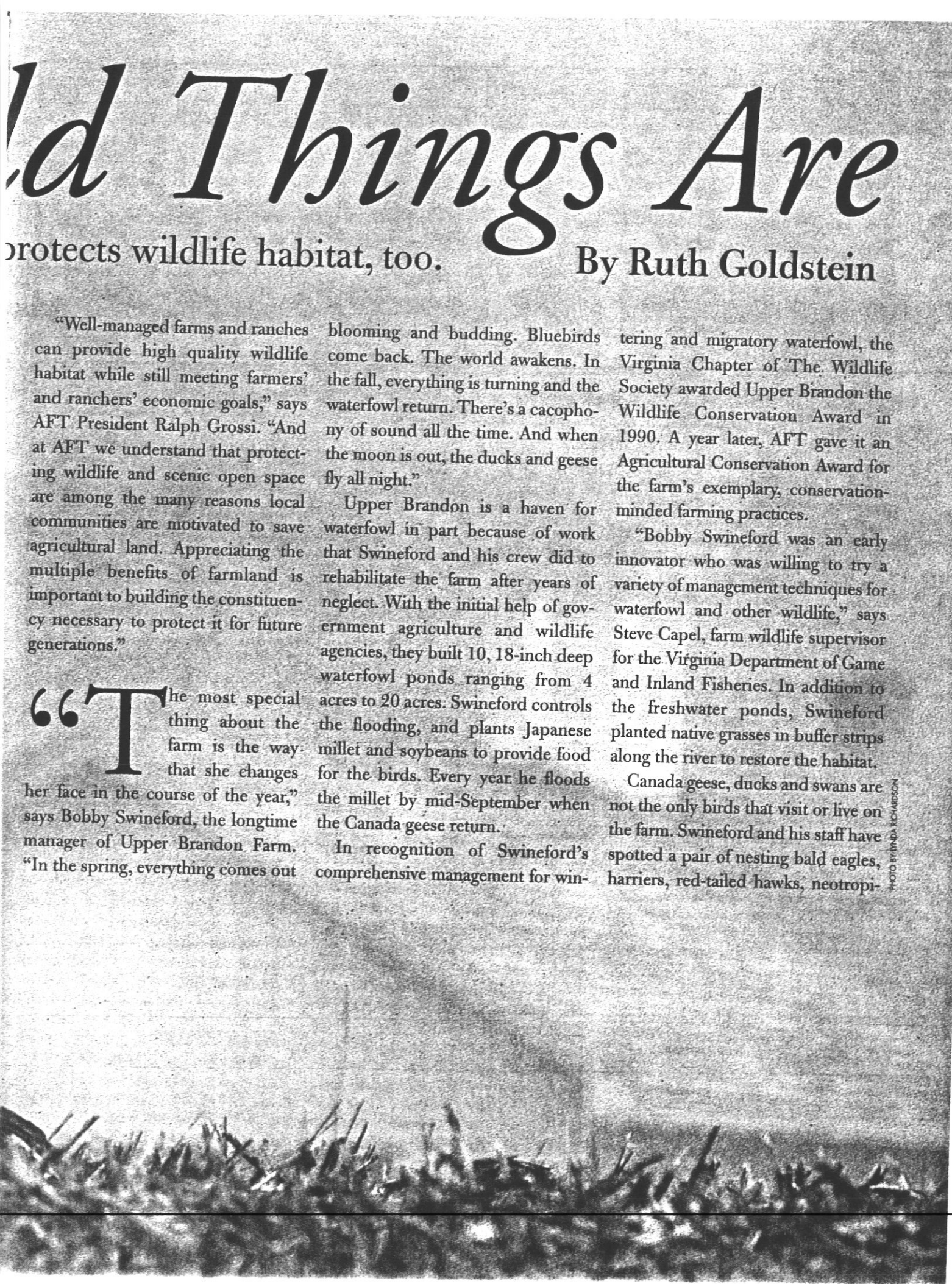
Upper Brandon is a haven for waterfowl in part because of work that Swineford and his crew did to rehabilitate the farm after years of neglect. With the initial help of government agriculture and wildlife agencies, they built 10, 18-inch deep waterfowl ponds ranging from 4 acres to 20 acres. Swineford controls the flooding, and plants Japanese millet and soybeans to provide food for the birds. Every year he floods the millet by mid-September when the Canada geese return.

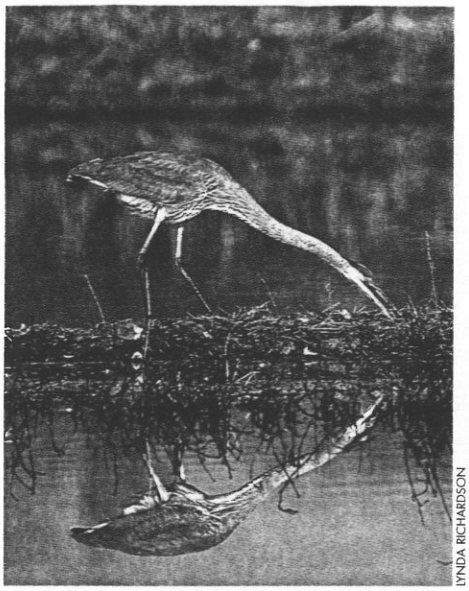
In recognition of Swineford's comprehensive management for wintering and migratory waterfowl, the Virginia Chapter of The Wildlife Society awarded Upper Brandon the Wildlife Conservation Award in 1990. A year later, AFT gave it an Agricultural Conservation Award for the farm's exemplary, conservation-minded farming practices.

"Bobby Swineford was an early innovator who was willing to try a variety of management techniques for waterfowl and other wildlife," says Steve Capel, farm wildlife supervisor for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. In addition to the freshwater ponds, Swineford planted native grasses in buffer strips along the river to restore the habitat.

Canada geese, ducks and swans are not the only birds that visit or live on the farm. Swineford and his staff have spotted a pair of nesting bald eagles, harriers, red-tailed hawks, neotropi-

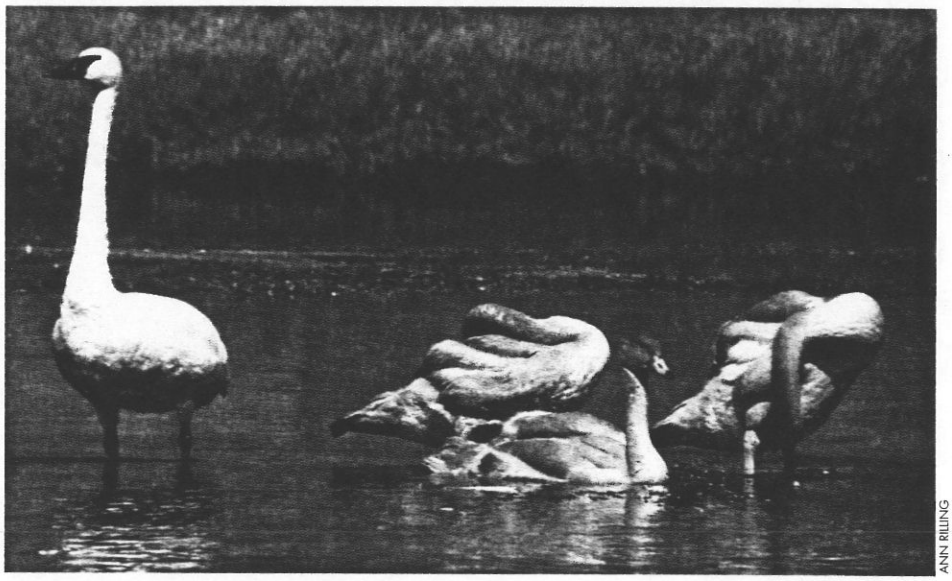
PHOTO BY LYNDA RICHARDSON





LYNDA RICHARDSON

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY



ANN RILLING

Previous page: Canada geese feed in a cornfield at Virginia's Upper Brandon Farm. Above: One of Upper Brandon's great blue herons. Upper right: The UX Ranch sits on Nevada's Franklin Lake, a haven for trumpeter swans (right), avocets, pelicans and other waterfowl.

cal migratory songbirds such as warblers and sparrows, and great blue heron, which have established a rookery with 50 to 100 nesting pairs. Mammals also roam the plantation. Deer feed on the clover Swineford planted to reduce erosion, while foxes and bobcats prowl the woods.

"The combination of natural wetlands and restored habitat makes Upper Brandon a model for riverfront farms, especially ones in the Chesapeake Bay watershed," says Dennis Bidwell, AFT's director of land protection. "We're proud to have played a role in making sure this land will remain a jewel on the James."

"Wherever there is water, there is life," says Dave Livermore, Utah state director of The Nature Conservancy. And there is water on the UX Ranch—at least some of the time. Owned by Neil and Kristin McQueary, the 3,600-acre cattle ranch sits on Franklin Lake, an ephemeral marsh nestled in the shadow of the Ruby Mountains near Elko, Nevada. Some years the lake dries up completely. But in wet years, when the lake ranges in depth from 6 inches to 5 feet, the ranch becomes a haven for waterfowl, a small minnow called the relic dace, and a variety of shorebirds.

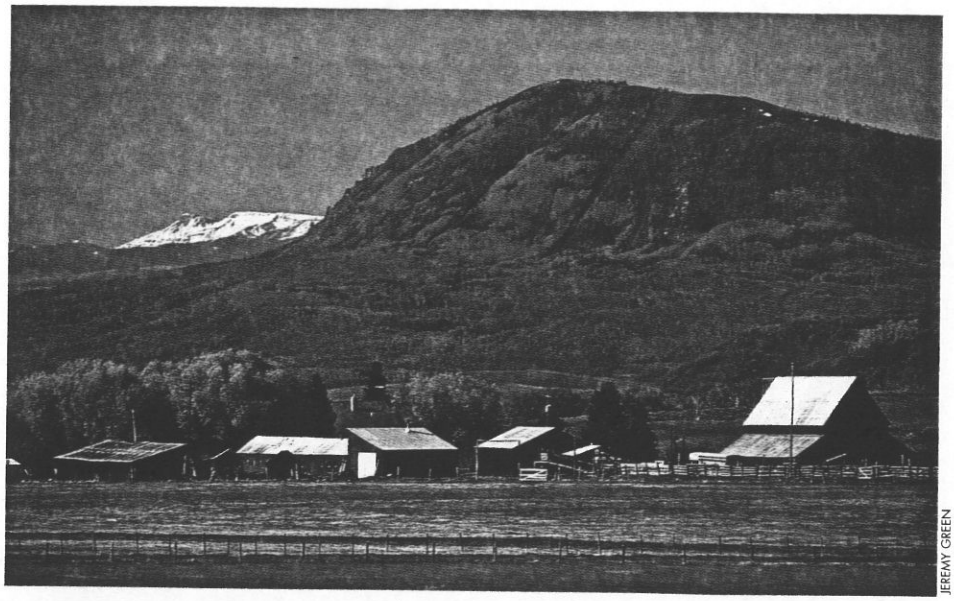
In fact, Franklin Lake is so critical for shorebirds that Birdlife International and the American Bird Conservancy have nominated it as an Important Bird Area, an honorary designation recognizing an area for its special habitat qualities. White-faced ibises, American avocets and black-necked stilts nest there after returning from Mexico and Central and South America. Long-billed curlews, American white pelicans, snowy and great egrets, great blue herons, greater sandhill cranes, willets, greater and lesser yellowlegs and Wilson's phalaropes use the farm as a stopover en route to more northern or southern climes.

Franklin Lake's shorebirds and other wildlife were endangered when the McQueary's bank threatened to foreclose on their property in 1987. The Nature Conservancy and AFT stepped in, bought the ranch, and leased it back to the McQuearys to give them a chance to stabilize their business. The Nature Conservancy wanted to protect the lake; AFT wanted to protect a working ranch and a way of life. Eight years later, the family was able to buy back the property.

"The unique arrangement we worked out with the McQuearys and The Nature Conservancy called for a conservation easement prohibiting grazing in the lakeside meadows from spring to mid-summer," says Bidwell. "It allows shorebirds and other waterfowl to nest and lay eggs without disturbance from the cattle."

The arrangement is working. "We've found that wildlife and cattle are very compatible," says Neil McQueary. "We just had our best year. We doubled the hay crop, and the rangelands are in fantastic shape."

McQueary and his fellow ranchers play an active role in protecting wildlife. He recalls a day when he and his family were



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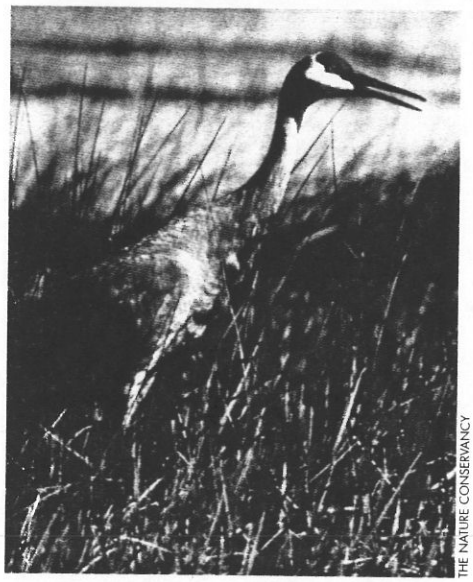

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

Left: The meadows bordering Nevada's Franklin Lake provide habitat for sandhill cranes. Above: The Fetcher Ranch in Colorado is home to elk (above right), moose, and a variety of birds, including eagles, woodpeckers and owls.

herding cattle and a neighbor on horseback stood over a killdeer nest to protect it.

"That's the kind of attitude we still have here," he says. "We work together to protect the wildlife."

The Upper Elk River Valley in Colorado, the gateway to the Mount Zirkel Wilderness Area, is still largely undeveloped—unlike many other valleys in Routt County. It is home to a handful of cattle and sheep ranches, outfitters and guest ranches, and significant wildlife habitat that ranchers and conservationists are trying to protect from encroaching development. One of the cattle ranchers, Jay Fetcher, manages his father's 1,300-acre spread.

"Ten years ago we had no elk on the ranch in the summer. Now we have 50 to 100 head that spend the summer on the meadow," says Fetcher, who is president of the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust. "Elk are going where there are no houses and fewer people. They are coming from areas where there are houses being built on their habitat."

Mike Middleton, district wildlife manager with the Colorado Division of Wildlife, also is worried about habitat loss. "To forestall development is a battle for us," he says. "Colorado has a history of aggressive development, especially in busting up large ranches into 35-acre developments. From a wildlife standpoint, there probably isn't a worse thing you could do.... The Upper Elk River Valley is just pretty enough and close enough to Steamboat Springs for this to be a threat."

In 1992, valley residents first banded together to protect their land. Working with AFT, they drafted the Upper Elk River Valley Compact, a statement of principles that declared their commitment to protect the "special scenic, rural and working character" of the valley. The compact gives valley landowners the security of knowing their neighbors have no intention of selling to developers.

In 1993, the Fetcher family protected the ranch they have owned for 49 years by donating a conservation easement to American Farmland Trust. Since then, three other valley ranches have donated conservation easements. "There is now a kind of peer pressure," Middleton says. "If you want to get along with your neighbors, throw a conservation easement on your property."

Conservationists say preventing development in the valley is especially important because the cottonwoods, dogwoods and willows along the Elk River make up a deciduous riparian forest, a rare habitat that relies on spring floods to regenerate. The forest is part of a 70-mile stretch unique to the Elk and Yampa Rivers, which meet about 10 miles west of Steamboat Springs and are two of the last free-flowing rivers in the area.

The riparian forest on the Fetchers' ranch includes willows, narrow-leafed cottonwoods and red-osier dogwoods. Holes in the cottonwoods attract northern flickers, hairy woodpeckers, tree swallows and nuthatches. The river and its surrounding habitat also attract American redstarts, kingfishers, great-horned owls, golden and bald eagles, moose, pine martens, and minks.

The Fetcher property has two other predominant habitats: irrigated meadows, which attract greater sandhill cranes, and gambel oaks on slopes that face southwest.

Bears, turkeys and shrub-loving birds, such as white-crowned sparrows, spotted- and green-tailed towhees, lazuli buntings and Virginia warblers, use gambel oaks for food and cover. The oaks also feed and shelter elk that come down from the higher National Forest grounds during the winter. Jay Fetcher has had some problems with elk damaging his fences, but they don't disturb his haystacks.

Jeff Jones, AFT's Rocky Mountain field representative, says that effective wildlife conservation depends on farmers and ranchers like Fetcher—especially in states such as Colorado, where half of the land is in agricultural production. That is where AFT can play an important role, he says. "AFT has the unique ability to bridge the gap between the conservation and agricultural communities, building community-based conservation programs that maintain the critical mass of agricultural land needed for both agricultural viability and wildlife habitat protection."

Conservationists have long warned that development destroys wildlife habitat by creating islands of open space that are too small to support healthy populations of large mammals and migratory birds. That is why agricultural land is so important for wildlife. Farms and ranches provide feeding, breeding and wintering areas, as well as stopovers for migrating birds. Agricultural land also acts as a buffer between natural habitat and development.

New federal, state and private programs are helping farmers protect wildlife habitat through stream corridor management, prairie and wetland restoration, seasonal flooding, and planting food crops for migratory birds. AFT, meanwhile, is developing projects to protect farmland that supports wildlife. For example, it has produced a map that indicates where important waterfowl areas overlap with the top 20 most-threatened agricultural areas in the nation. And in Colorado, AFT's Rocky Mountain field office is working with Colorado State University to compare the diversity of wildlife on working ranches with that on subdivisions.

JEREMY GREEN

Upper Elk River Valley cattle rancher Jay Fetcher (left) and his father, John.

"AFT has always understood that agricultural land is important to landowners and communities for a variety of reasons," says Bidwell. "As we expand nationwide, we will continue to help Americans identify the role farmland plays in their lives."

In Colorado, Jay Fetcher and the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust are doing just that. "Wildlife benefits of farm and ranchland are at the heart of what the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust is all about," says Fetcher. "We feel that if we protect the land for agriculture, then the wildlife and the habitat come along with it. We want to show the public this. I let people come in and fish catch-and-release here. We don't charge. We love having people come in, talk to us, observe how we manage the land, and go away happy."

Ruth Goldstein is AFT's federal policy program manager.